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ABSTRACT

To assist future directors and tutors of a particular writing laboratory, this report outlines some of the procedures and activities that were involved in the first year of the laboratory's operation. The report outlines efforts to publicize the program with the administration and students, relates communication efforts between the laboratory and the freshmen English teachers, lists statistics on the participants, discusses the theory and practical aspects of the laboratory program, and offers a philosophical discussion on the function of a remedial writing program. (MAI)

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THE ADMINISTRATION OF A WRITING LAB

During the academic year 1972-1973, I served as the director of the Indiana University Writing Lab, an organization consisting of two other advanced graduate students, myself and the secretary for the Composition Program. Our job was to provide assistance to anyone in the university who was having trouble with his or her writing. "Anyone" included the thousands of students on campus, ranging from first-term freshmen to Ph.D. candidates struggling with their dissertations. Despite this open-door policy, however, we were not overwhelmed with clients as the Fall semester began; no one, it seemed, really liked coming to the Writing Lab. We responded by becoming an Outreach Program of sorts, trying to make it easy for students to find out about our services, to make appointments for tutoring, and so forth. After a year of coordinating these efforts, I wrote up a report on our activities, explaining what we had done, and in some cases, why. The report was intended for future directors and tutors in the Indiana University Writing Lab, but it has occurred to me that other teachers in other universities might find it useful to read about our procedures and strategies.

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GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

This first section concerns the general administration of the Writing Lab in 1972-73. I've tried to put the details in chronological order so that they will resemble a schedule.

I. Getting the Word Out

During the first week of the Fall semester, we sent out memos to as many different groups as seemed reasonable, on the assumption that the more people who know about the Lab, the better service it can give.

First, the Chairmen of the Academic Departments. We sent a slightly revised version of our standard description to all the chairmen. Undoubtedly some of them never saw it, and others tore it up, but it turned out later that some of them had sent copies of it to their teachers (History Dept., e.g.). This is one of the ways we tried to live up to our name as the university's remedial writing service.

Next we sent a memo to everyone teaching English during the fall semester, telling them what changes we'd made in the previous Writing Clinic, but mainly just reminding them what the Writing Lab was, and inviting them to make use of it. Obviously the English A.I.'s are the prime target for this kind of attention, since the vast majority of out students come from their classes.

We also sent descriptions of the Writing Lab to various specialized offices on campus which are connected in some way with remedial or tutorial work.

(1) Lila M. Argue. She is responsible for the Directory of Student Counseling and Personnel Services. We sent her a short memo, designed to be an entry in the Directory.

(2) Eleanor Victoria Williams. She is the Coordinator of Minority

Student Affairs, and put out a Directory of Student Services for Minority Students. Dr. Williams sent us a request for some information on the Lab, and we sent her an edited version of our memo to the English A.I.'s,

(3) We did not send a memo to Mrs. Caramel Russell, Director, Afro-American Tutorial Program. We should have. But we were in touch with her from time to time, because some of our students also had tutors for one or more of their subjects, and the tutors were supplied by Mrs. Russell.

(4) We did not send a memo to Annabel Newman, who helps direct the secondary school teacher education program in the Dept. of Education. Late in the year, we saw her about a student who was trying to use the Writing Lab as validation of work toward the Bachelor's Degree. Mrs. Newman is interested in the teaching of writing (she holds a degree in English) and keeping in contact with her wouldn't hurt.

(5) We did not send anything to the University Tutoring Program. In fact I don't even know where the office is or what it's called. But it is a volunteer program, and since it offers individual tutoring (like the Afro-American Tutorial Program) it is probably effective. I think that working in tandem with programs like this greatly extends the effectiveness and range of the Writing Lab.

(6) We did not send to the Reading and Studies Skills Center in Pine Hall. They also rely on volunteers, but the volunteers are trained graduate students in Reading Technology who desire practice teaching. So a student who needs help sometimes has to wait for a tutor to turn up, and this could take weeks.

At any rate, this is a service we can't provide at the Lab, and it's sometimes necessary for us to rely on it.

II. In-Class Presentations

We thought that because of the minimal attention students give announcements read to them by their teachers (i.e., announcements like "There is a Writing Lab available. . . ."), it might be best to confront the students face to face. We did this by sending another memo to the English A.I.'s and making ourselves available to visit any class, any time. This worked out pretty well, and, in fact, we were asked to do more presentations the second semester than the first. In the Spring we probably visited between 30 and 35 classes this way.

Our basic tool for these presentations was the Writing Lab Description. We either used this as an outline to speak from, or passed out copies of it to the class and then commented on the three parts.

My personal feeling about these talks is that one should do the following: (1) Disseminate all the necessary information clearly, with the Lab's office number (BH 447) and telephone number written on the board if there are no handouts; (2) Present the problem of remedial writing in a business-like, adult-to-adult manner, using ordinary language, and avoiding terms like "remedial writing"; (3) Emphasize the fact that our students consist of a few people who need work on sentence structure, syntax, and the like, and many people who need help organizing their ideas; that defining an idea and then building it into a paper is difficult, and that we are available to talk to them about just this problem; (4) Get out of there in under ten minues; staying longer simply weakens the impact on the students.

This offer, as well as the memo to the Academic Chairmen, was sent out again at the beginning of the second semester.

III. Periodic Reports to the Teachers of Freshman English

The only thing that can make a Writing Lab work is communication between the Lab and the public; if everybody knows what's going on at the Lab, the chances are greatly increased for the teachers' sending people there, and the students' wanting to come. To supplement this communication, we decided that some kind of newsletter was advisable, and we wrote our Mid-Year Report, which was sent to practically the entire English Department. It's true that writing these things (or getting around to writing them) is a pain in the neck, but once you've done it, you're glad for a long time to come; people like to be informed, and they reciprocate by working with you.

IV. Statistics on Students Who Came to the Lab in 1972-73

Many thanks to Kiva for the statistics she gathered this year. The categories were chosen to try to uncover differences between 1st semester and 2nd semester; minority and white students; total volume of students and number of steady clients, and so on.

Our results showed that the white students declined in the 2nd semester, but the minority students increased slightly. This is partly due to better communication with the Black Studies programs, but also, I think, to the ongoing need of the typical Groups student for tutorial assistance (cf. Group 71, 72, 73, etc. - summer booster program for in-coming Black or Puerto Rican freshmen).

The drop in the total number of students probably reflects the increased self-assurance of the freshmen during the 2nd semester. However, the English students did not decline proportionately; I think this points to our stepped-up program of class visitations 2nd semester, as well as to increased teacher interest in the Writing Lab.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section is more concerned with the administration of the Writing Lab as it bears on the actual meetings with the students. Since any course of action implies some sort of conceptual framework, my assumptions about this kind of teaching are interwoven with the description of what happened this year in the Writing Lab.

I. Secretary, Office Hours, Housekeeping

The best change we made this year was to coordinate all Writing Lab business through one central office: Ballantine 447, where Kiva Branam is on duty all week, 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. When describing the Lab to students, or to anyone else, we always told them to make themselves an appointment at 447 Ballantine, and that somehow or other one of the three people in the Lab would be able to see them within a day or so.

Kiva kept a file of information sheets in her desk. Each student who came in to sign up for an appointment would fill out a sheet with name, address, telephone number, and name of English A.I., if applicable; we could use these sheets either as records of what we'd done with a student in conference (especially in the case of a regular, weekly, or twice-weekly student), or we could simply use them as a telephone book when we wanted to call one of the students or A.I.'s.

We were able to use faculty offices for our tutoring this year. Each semester we had permanent access (three keys) to an office on the fourth or fifth floor of Ballantine. These worked out very well, as they were conveniently near BH 447, and had an official look to them, which helps a little.

Since there were three of us during both semesters, our hours could be relatively light: for each of us, two two-hour sessions a week. We tried to stagger the hours so that during the week, both morning and afternoon hours were open. Above all, we tried to be flexible. If a student absolutely could not make an appointment during one of the scheduled hours, one of us would expand his session to accommodate him - and if even that didn't do it, we agreed to meet the student at night in the library cafeteria, or at some other mutually convenient time and place.

II. First Appointment: the Tutor and the Student

The first change we made this year - and possibly it was a trivial change - was to rename the Writing Clinic, calling it the Writing Lab instead. We did this because it seemed to me that "Clinic" suggested first aid for the walking wounded, and if there's anything that stands in the way of a student's learning to write, it's a passive attitude of "teach me" ("cure me"). WRITING LAB suggests to me a place where students work out their own problems under careful supervision (and actually that's more or less what does happen). How the name affects the students, I'm not sure. But one thing is sure: "Writing Clinic" is a tenacious phrase among the teachers; this may be because "clinic" is more vivid a metaphor than "lab," but again, I'm not at all sure we want the clinic metaphor imprinting itself in <u>anybody's</u> mind, including our own.

When the student first reports to a tutor, he should ideally have with him some of his previous written work. This is not a substitute for what the student himself has to say, but it does help to bring the discussion down to earth; if you're sharp (and a little lucky), you can use the old papers to focus the discussion of his problems. I find that the papers give me a good sense of what the problems are; but, of course, the problem is in the student, and spotting it is only the preliminary to showing him what the problem is (which may take some doing and convincing), and showing him what to do about it.

One of the nicest things about reaching in the Lab is that you and the student are not bound together by your duty to give a grade, and his necessity of getting one. You are, rather, in the position to work together and make progress, or simply call it quits. Thus, you can be more honest with a student, and he with you. If the student wants to play the game of "teach me," (sometimes this is a student's reaction to his teacher's having sent him to the Writing Lab for "help"), you can simply make it clear that you're there to work with him, and not to give out pink pills, or free red pencil jobs on his themes. Then you tell him exactly how you both could work together on his writing. After that, he can take it or leave it; if he thinks he's not getting anywhere with your kind of tutoring, he can and should leave; if you think he's getting nowhere, you should discontinue his appointments (at least with you; he might do better with another tutor).

My own bias as a teacher of writing is toward giving the student the responsibility for his writing (the responsibility he already has of

course, but can't or won't assume, for whatever reason). The best way to do this is by talking about his approach to writing a particular paper, and to do that, you have to talk about Personal Interests, Assignments, Topics, Selection of Problem Areas, Definition of Problems, Selection of Data for Illustration, Organization of Arguments, and Beginnings and Endings. In other words, he can't take responsibility for what he's writing until he knows what he's doing, and why; and it's your job to lead him through the process (outlined above) so that he does know. Usually if you can spend half hour with a student he will be able to form an idea of how to go about writing the paper; then turn him loose to write a draft, telling him you'll look at it when it's written. Then, when he has gone through the process of writing, you can settle down and talk about comma splices, subject and verb agreement, and whatever else needs to be cleaned up. If you start with syntax and style, he might never see the forest for the trees (unless he or she is one of those relatively rare people who are well-organized and clear about their objectives but can't handle English Grammar; then you can start right in on the grammar).

III. The Long View

The Writing Lab, as I see it, is both a diagnostic facility, and a tutoring program; necessary both things. As Julie Carson says (The Writing Clinic, 1971-2, p. 3), "We didn't edit, but we tried to point out problems, then work with those problems - sometimes within the framework of the papers, sometimes in isolation."

What this means is that the tutor is looking for more than just recurrent errors, although that is always a good start; ultimately he is trying to find out why the student makes a particular kind of error. Generally

the faults in a paper are somehow linked, and if the tutor can determine the logic behind the system of linked faults, he is on his way to the "why" of that particular bad writing. The Writing Lab tutor has one advantage over the classroom A.I. in this kind of work: he can get the student's reaction to any detail, anytime he wants to ask, and so it is easier for him to see the relationship between the writer and the writing.

It follows that the tutor has to be something of a student of human nature as well as a writing instructor, and sometimes we just aren't competent, i.e., haven't the necessary training or experience. However, there will still be times when a tutor will realize that the student is hiding behind a series of introductory clauses; writing short and empty papers because of his insecurity and consequent dislike of a course; writing windy and chaotic prose because he is shying away from dependence on any one idea. We are <u>not</u> psychologists, but more is needed than simply showing the student the right way to parse a sentence; if the student' didn't have some kind of block, he would have learned to write long ago from teachers as good as we are, who were teaching by precept and example.

It may seem odd to mention only fearful students and defensive errors. But this is a remedial writing facility, and the student we get usually expects to be beaten down for writing badly. Hence, he sometimes wants the Writing Lab to protect him from the imagined consequences of his trying to write differently and better. The threat of retribution is in the student's own mind. But sometimes, for different reasons, the teacher also wants to believe in this pattern of student (child) - tutor (father or mother): after all, if the tutor takes over the responsibility for the student's writing, the teacher might be able to get out of giving the

student a grade. Two common escape routes are: (1) to give the student an Incomplete: this is supposed to provide for the student's improvement at his own pace, while allowing the teacher to put off giving him a D, perhaps forever, but anyway not until the Fall; and (2) to give the student an honorary C or B, on the grounds that he attended the Writing Lab regularly. Neither of these plans is beneficial to the student.

It is necessary to preserve our neutrality at all times (state clearly and firmly that we have nothing to do with grading, and can neither suggest a grade, nor agree to one). Nevertheless, the only way we can change a student's writing is to convince him that we can show him a better way to write, which the teacher will also recognize as better; and we have to be able to assure the student that he will not be penalized for the writing that he does while he is learning. There are honest and practical ways to do this. Perhaps the best is to have the student write successive drafts of the same paper, until it is good enough to merit a decedent grade. Usually the teacher will be glad to cooperate by extending the deadline to allow for the rewriting, <u>if</u> he can be sure that all this reworking is the student's work, and not just the student's copying the changes the tutor has made in the successive drafts. Again, the advantage of working first on the student's organization and argument is that many of the grammatical errors will disappear as he gets a better idea of what he is writing.